

# Alabama's Red-Bellied Turtle



Photo by Roger Clay

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Most Alabamians know the official state bird is the yellowhammer. Likewise, it is well known that the official state tree is the longleaf pine, but I doubt many are aware of Alabama's official reptile. Considering this hard-shelled reptile exists only in the Mobile-Tensaw River Delta, it is not surprising that so few know its name. As a matter of fact, our state reptile is so rare that in 1987 the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Agency designated it as an endangered species.

The official reptile for the state of Alabama is the Alabama red-bellied turtle (*Pseudemys alabamensis*). The female adult turtle is slightly larger than the male at 13 inches. The adult male's average length is 12 inches. The upper shell color may be greenish to dark brown or black with yellowish or reddish vertical markings along the sides. The under shell is pale to yellow or red with or without dark markings. The young turtles exhibit the bright red or orange undershell (belly). The legs and head are dark with yellow stripes.

The Alabama red-bellied turtle's home range is exclusively in the Mobile-Tensaw River Delta in Mobile and Baldwin counties. The Delta's freshwater streams, rivers, and bays with shallow-to-moderate depths and extensive beds of

marily pond weed, wild celery, duckweed, and the introduced Eurasian water-milfoil.

Nesting of the Alabama red-bellied turtle occurs from May through July. The female turtle locates a sandy site near the water and lays four to nine eggs in a shallow nest. The hatchlings usually emerge in late summer.

Life as a turtle is difficult from the very beginning: fish crows, raccoons, and feral swine feed on the eggs of the turtle nest. The young turtles are preyed upon by snakes, large fish, and wading birds. Even adult turtles bear tooth scars on their shells from alligator attacks.

Considering the many obstacles the Alabama red-bellied turtle faces throughout its life cycle and its limited range, it is unlikely this reptile will ever reach populations high enough for removal from the endangered species list. However, understanding the difficulties the Alabama red-bellied turtle faces daily should provide every Alabamian with a greater appreciation of our little known official state reptile. ♣



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*Alabama red-bellied turtle hatchling in shallow water.*

aquatic vegetation are preferred by the Alabama red-bellied turtle. One other place it has been found is the Little River in Monroe County.

The diet of the Alabama red-bellied turtle consists of vegetative matter, pri-